

Intellectual Terrorism and the Church: The Case of the Google Bomb

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The United States today could be considered to be in an information age. One sees such foreshadowed in the “future history” the novel entitled *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* where a particular computer became charged with administering the Moon. That computer named “Mike” was one with apparently a low sense of humor that favored practical jokes was found in the story to be self-aware and sentient.¹ The main thrust of that story became that that same computer came to be appointed to lead a revolution.² The science fiction example of *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* is perhaps a warning to today’s culture about how much trust should be placed in machines. To many of the characters in the story that computer was able to simulate a living being who acted as leader of the revolution. The computer itself made the decisions about how the revolution went.

With concerns over the preservation of documentary heritage in light of computerization concern can be had as to what is happening to that documentary heritage. While society does not yet know a computer like “Mike” it does put much faith in unthinking, unfeeling algorithms to present information considered to be “correct.” One such case is the faith placed in the search engine known as Google.

In the middle of the 2004 United States presidential election a phenomenon known as “Google-bombing” came to light. Jonathan Sidener noted in *San Diego Union-Tribune* that “Google-bombing” referred to manipulation of the results of a search engine to present disinformation.³ A major example cited by Sidener was the search term “miserable failure”. Using such in Google would result in one’s first result being the official biography of President George W. Bush.⁴ In a *Baltimore Sun* article it was noted that the search term “national disgrace” when the article was published in December 2005 directed one to the official biography of baseball commissioner Bud Selig.⁵

¹ Robert A. Heinlein, *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966): 13-14.

² *Ibid.*, 97-99.

³ Jonathan Sidener, “Dropping ‘Google-bombs’,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 14 June 2004, Business, p. C-1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ “Going For The Bomb With Google,” *Baltimore Sun*, 18 December 2005, Sports, p. 2D.

The basic way the manipulation occurs is by abusing the rules by which the PageRank algorithm which bases importance of a web page, namely how much a page is linked to. Pages are ranked based upon how many other pages link to them.⁶ The quality of information to Google relates to its popularity in terms of being linked to.⁷ In a column in the *Australian*, Emma Tom asked hypothetically what difference there might be if people evaluate a statement based upon the number of times it is stated rather than any evidence backing it up.⁸ This present reality harkens to another piece of “future history” written prior to World War II.

Aldous Huxley wrote in his novel *Brave New World* about a social engineering tool called the hypnopaedia. The technology of hypnopaedia (sleep learning) was used to lay a framework for the propagation of false ideas in the populace.⁹ Ideas would be propagated through their constant repetition which would then imprint upon human minds that the idea must be valid if repeated so often. The character of Mustapha Mond noted in the book that effect of such repetitions, numbering thousands upon thousands of times, of a single proposition resulted in it being accepted by children as truth.¹⁰ Manipulation through flooding of an item is an idea thought of prior to World War II that is now becoming reality.

What does this have to do with Churches of Christ? It can be said, perhaps, that a matter of concern in Churches of Christ is focusing on how we preserve our heritage for the future. In an information age it becomes necessary to reconsider how Churches of Christ manage knowledge and preserve a body of tradition.

In the Churches of Christ, papers, periodicals, debates, and more have arisen that show a long-standing commitment to a documentary record in print.¹¹ Michael Casey

⁶ David A. Vise and Mark Malseed, *The Google Story* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 55.

⁷ Brad Grimes, “Fooling Google,” *PC Magaine*, 6 May 2003, 74.

⁸ Emma Tom, “Credibility Takes A Hit When Internet Fakt Meets Fikshun,” *Australian*, 18 February 2004, Features, p. 11.

⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), 17-19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ Michael Casey, “Mastered By the Word: Print Culture, Modernization, and ‘The Priesthood of All Readers’ in the Churches of Christ,” in *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Movement In Honor of Don Haymes*, ed. Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 312.

notes that Campbell led the Restoration Movement in having a culture based upon printed materials like books and journals.¹² McAllister and Tucker note in their text *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* that the origins of all three principal streams of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement emanate from a printed document that originated from the area of Washington in Pennsylvania located south of Pittsburgh.¹³ The nature and existence of publications such as Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, as well as serials such as *Millennial Harbinger*, show that Churches of Christ are tied heavily to print materials for preserving heritage and tradition.

Douglas Foster of Abilene Christian University confirmed in 1994 this role for publications when he claimed that the systems of control towards uniformity within the church focused on means of information distribution such as educational institutions, publications, and lectureships.¹⁴ Foster notes that those institutions provided uniformity on issues in the past among a range of autonomous congregations. He also notes, though, that such things today now gauge the diversity of congregations rather than promote uniformity.¹⁵ Writing later in *Firm Foundation* the importance of educational institutions as a system of control and information distribution was confirmed by Lundy writing about the alleged existence of false teachers in the institutions who act as change agents to radically change the nature of Churches of Christ.¹⁶ Freed-Hardeman University President Emeritus E. Claude Gardner also wrote about the importance of educational institutions in terms of the viability of Churches of Christ in the future.¹⁷ This can be seen to be an overall trend as discussed in Riley's text *God on the Quad* where she notes that religious colleges seek to equip students to work in a secular world without losing faith.¹⁸ The overall concern, though, is that printed materials are slipping away from

¹² *Ibid.*, 313.

¹³ Lester McAllister and William Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1975), 114.

¹⁴ Douglas A. Foster, *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken?: Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1994), 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶ James R. Lundy, "'Our' Colleges," *Firm Foundation*, 1 May 2001, 8.

¹⁷ E. Claude Gardner, "Blurring the Lines," *Firm Foundation*, 1 February 2003, 15.

¹⁸ Naomi Schaefer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 9.

their prior privileged place of being a main way of creating a body of tradition and knowledge.

Building off ideas propounded over fifty years earlier by Heinlein and Huxley it appears that technology has now begun to catch up to hypothetical concerns expressed in science fiction. While neither Heinlein nor Huxley might have considered the Internet in its contemporary form the existence of the Internet today provides opportunity to discuss such concerns. A 2005 OCLC Online Computer Library Center (“OCLC”) research report noted that survey respondents aged fourteen to twenty-four say they trusted information found through search engines.¹⁹ In light of the acknowledged existence of Google-bombing, and the danger it poses, the hypothetical concerns of fiction authors like Heinlein, Huxley, and others is becoming real. It is not much farther to go to have to consider the possibility of the Internet’s unreliability.

In today’s world students are moving away from the printed word as their primary source of information. As found in OCLC’s research, results from search engines are accepted with confidence as being authoritative. In response to an article in the *Toronto Star*, in regard to Google-bombing, Google’s technology director Craig Silverstein noted that all Google reflects is the state of opinion on the Internet.²⁰ Churches of Christ, however, focus instead on reasoning and logic rather than popularity.²¹ In terms of preserving the heritage of Churches of Christ it then becomes necessary to consider how to cope with this reality in the context of the higher education of the students of the tradition. The question then begged is whether or not a tradition is endangered by this shift in the surrounding environment.

Recalling that printed materials are not the only source of authority in Churches of Christ and higher education institutions also play a role, it becomes necessary to then consider what role universities can play in approaching this. In such consideration, though, one must first consider how higher education is typically organized within the tradition of Churches of Christ before considering how to deal with student information-seeking behavior. At the 1996 Christian Scholars Conference, Thomas Olbricht proposed the theory of scholarship that it is part of God’s charge to humanity to maintain the

¹⁹ Cathy De Rosa and others, contribs., *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005), 6-5.

²⁰ “Search Party,” *Toronto (Canada) Star*, 24 January 2004, Life, p. L3.

²¹ See for example: Michael W. Casey, “‘Come Let Us Reason Together’: The Heritage of the Churches of Christ As A Source For Rhetorical Invention,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no.4 (2004) : 490.

world.²² Olbricht indicated further in his paper that at the time that scholarship was about becoming expert in a subject.²³ In a 2001 Christian Scholars Conference paper Olbricht noted that he concluded that the educational institutions related to Churches of Christ adhered to the basics of Campbell's idea for structuring a Christian University through serving students with vocational goals as well as those with professional goals.²⁴ The question then becomes how to reconcile the seemingly conflicting matters of the role of a scholar as a caretaker with the role of the educational institution in providing an education to students whether they are pursuing vocational goals or professional goals.

If the Churches of Christ have a primarily print-based heritage, how does such translate to the digitized realm of the Internet? Although resources such as the Restoration Serials Index exist, students not near any of the colleges or universities connected to Churches of Christ would likely have an impossible time tracking down those resources. Students who became ministers after graduation would be well-advised to keep well-stocked personal libraries in such instances and to be on the mailing lists of publishers of materials connected to Churches of Christ. With a heritage that is still predominantly print-based and not totally digitized students must be acquainted early on with the existence of print resources as well as with how to access them.

The prospect of disinformation being spread is also something that would be difficult to cope with under current models of higher education within Churches of Christ. If students seek to take the path of least resistance, they are more likely to seek information online than to make a major effort to locate printed materials. This has been found to occur recently even at the mighty University of Oxford in England across a variety of disciplines.²⁵ It also appeared recently from the University of Oxford that students are bringing habits from pre-college studies of merely copying materials from the Internet and cobbling it into something that teachers just pass through.²⁶ With the knowledge that Google bombing was utilized during the most recent presidential election campaign to

²² Thomas Olbricht, "Scholar As Caretaker" (Nashville, TN: Lipscomb University, Christian Scholars Conference, 1996, photocopied), 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ Thomas Olbricht, "Whatever Happened to Alexander Campbell's Idea of a Christian College?" (Dallas, TX: Harvey Hotel, Christian Scholars Conference, 2001, photocopied), 194, 204.

²⁵ Jonathan D'arcy, "Internet Is the Blogger's Friend Plagiarism? Everybody's At It, says Oxford Student Jonathan D'arcy," *Daily Telegraph* (London), 14 March 2006, News, p. 2.

²⁶ Will Pavia, "Oxford Admits to a Culture of Copying," *Times* (London), 14 March 2006, Home News, p. 11.

carry out smear tactics, it is a short distance away from such to consider the prospects of heretical disinformation being spread and being picked up unintentionally by students through such information-seeking behaviors.

In a tradition such as Churches of Christ, the problem results in terms of how to stop the flow of disinformation through means such as Google-bombing. In a religion with no central governing body that has coercive authority and jurisdiction over the entire membership of congregations, there is not necessarily a way to say definitely what on the Internet might be heresy and what might good. An example of making such a statement for the whole of a tradition's membership would be similar to an action such as the Anti-Defamation League offering a device that would filter websites deemed hateful based upon the league's selection criteria.²⁷ It might be considered in making pronouncements about the viability of sites and judging them that that would be censorship contrary to search for truth. In terms of Churches of Christ tradition it is hard to consider such happening. It must be remembered that Hughes wrote about how an additional commitment of the earliest parts of the Restoration Movement were committed to the freedom to search for truth in addition to restoration and unity.²⁸

Notwithstanding the two visions presented by Olbricht about the role of academicians in providing education there perhaps becomes a necessity for the colleges and universities to consider introducing formal information literacy classes. If such classes could be found early in the higher education of students, although they are not frequently found, they would help explain the Internet and teach students how to evaluate what the students located. Such a class could be required of first-semester freshmen, as well as of transfer students, to take during their first semester.

The idea of the libraries of our educational institutions as resources from the broader brotherhood is not new as it was proposed by Annie May Alston as early as 1966.²⁹ Librarians are uniquely positioned with backgrounds in managing information to teach such classes as mentioned above. Librarians could also be asked to undertake an outreach role akin to that undertaken by faculty participating in sermon seminars, lecture-ships, and conferences where those in ministry seek professional development. The need

²⁷ Laura J. Gurak, *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet With Awareness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 61.

²⁸ Richard T. Hughes, *Reclaiming a Heritage: Reflections on the Heart, Soul & Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002), 24.

²⁹ Annie May Alston, "Harding Library: A Teaching Device," *Christian Chronicle*, Mid-South Edition, 18 February 1966, p. 3.

for guidance in working with information exists and will only increase as information technology systems and information dissemination models evolve.

Information technology has grown more and more complex. Students increasingly turn to such technology to find the information they require for their studies. With the advent of Google-bombing, does a risk exist of well-placed persons with technical ability executing a campaign to change what was once heresy into accepted belief? Since the tools exist to misrepresent data nowadays far more easily than in the past, it is worth considering a thought noted by Robert Heinlein about machines where once a population becomes dependent upon machines it is then hostage to those who tend them.³⁰ In the gap posed by this stands librarians with an ambiguous role clearly deserving clarification in the future.

³⁰ See Robert A. Heinlein, "The Roads Must Roll," in *The Past Through Tomorrow: Future History Stories* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 39.

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